

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, PINT, SY, US
SUBJECT: SYRIA REMOVES REMAINING RESTRICTIONS PARTICULAR TO
SYRIAN JEWS

1. SUMMARY: FONMINISTRY BRIEFED US JANUARY 10 ON CONFIDENTIAL
PRESIDENTIAL DECREE WHICH APPEARS TO BE FINAL STEP IN
REMOVING REMAINING RESTRICTIONS PARTICULAR TO SYRIAN
JEWISH COMMUNITY AND OPENING PATH FOR EMIGRATION OF
YOUNG WOMEN SEEKING MARRIAGE. CUSTODIANSHIP OF PALESTINIAN
REFUGEE INSTITUTE OVER PROPERTY OF SYRIAN JEWS WHO HAD
LEFT SYRIA ABOLISHED. TIMING AND CONTENT OF THESE
MEASURES CLEARLY INTENDED AS GESTURE TO U.S. END SUMMARY.

2. FOREIGN MINISTRY DIRECTOR OF AMERICAN AFFAIRS, SHOULFI,
SUMMONED ME JANUARY 13. RECALLING INTEREST OF CONGRESSMAN
WAXMAN AND SOLARZ IN SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY, AND PARTICU-
LARLY SITUATION OF MARRIAGEABLE JEWISH WOMEN, SHOULFI SAID
HE WISHED TO INFORM USG "INFORMALLY" OF THE CONTENTS
OF PRESIDENTIAL DECREE ISSUED JANUARY 10. PARAPHRASING FROM
COPY OF DECREE IN HIS HAND, SHOULFI DESCRIBED NEW MEASURES
AS FOLLOWS:

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A. SYRIAN JEWS WISHING TO TRAVEL ABROAD WILL BE
PERMITTED TO DO SO UPON APPLICATION TO, AND APPROVAL
BY, SYRIAN SECURITY AUTHORITIES AS IN THE CASE OF ALL
SYRIAN CITIZENS. THE AMOUNT OF "BOND OF RETURN" WILL BE
SET ACCORDING TO THE FINANCIAL AND SOCIAL SITUATION OF
THE INDIVIDUAL.

B. SYRIAN JEWISH WOMEN WHO HAVE MARRIED FOREIGNERS WITHOUT OBTAINING THE REQUIRED PRIOR APPROVAL FROM THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR MAY NOW REGISTER THEIR MARRIAGES WITHOUT PUNISHMENT. UNMARRIED SYRIAN JEWISH WOMEN MAY APPLY FOR PERMISSION TO MARRY FOREIGNERS UNDER PROCEDURES APPLICABLE TO ALL SYRIAN CITIZENS.

C. THE SUPREME COMMITTEE FOR JEWISH AFFAIRS HAS BEEN ABOLISHED.

D. SYRIAN JEWS MAY BEQUEATH OR INHERIT PROPERTY IN THE SAME MANNER AS OTHER SYRIANS.

E. THE CUSTODIANSHIP OF THE INSTITUTE FOR PALESTINIAN REFUGEES OVER PROPERTY OF SYRIAN JEWS WHO HAD LEFT THE COUNTRY HAS BEEN CANCELLED. PROPERTY PRESENTLY OR FORMERLY OWNED BY SYRIAN JEWS WILL BE DEALT WITH ACCORDING TO SYRIAN PROPERTY LAWS IN THE SAME MANNER AS PROPERTY OF OTHER SYRIANS.

F. RESTRICTIONS ON OBTAINING PROPERTY DEEDS AND OTHER TITLE DOCUMENTS HAVE BEEN LIFTED.

3. IN REPLY TO MY QUESTIONS AFTER THIS PRESENTATION, SHOEFI AMPLIFIED ON THE ABOVE PROVISIONS AS FOLLOWS:

A. WITH REGARD TO OBTAINING PASSPORTS AND POSTING BOND, SHOEFI SAID HE THOUGHT THE SITUATION OF A SYRIAN JEW WAS NOW EXACTLY LIKE ANY OTHER SYRIAN. ANY SYRIAN
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WISHING TO LEAVE SYRIA HAD TO APPLY FOR A PASSPORT, WHICH MIGHT OR MIGHT NOW BE GRANTED BY SYRIAN SECURITY AUTHORITIES FOR ANY NUMBER OF REASONS, USUALLY MILITARY SERVICE REQUIREMENTS. ANY SYRIAN COULD BE REQUIRED TO POST A BOND WHICH WOULD BE FORFEITED IN CASE OF NONRETURN. IT WAS SHOEFI'S IMPRESSION THAT IF A SYRIAN JEW DID NOT RETURN, THE BOND WOULD BE FORFEITED BUT THERE WOULD BE NO OTHER PUNISHMENT OR REPRISALS AGAINST FAMILY OR COMMUNITY MEMBERS.

B. REGARDING THE QUESTION OF TRAVEL OF MARRIAGEABLE WOMEN, SHOEFI SAID THAT SYRIAN LAW REQUIRED ANY SYRIAN WISHING TO MARRY A FOREIGNER TO OBTAIN PRIOR PERMISSION FROM THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR, WITH CERTAIN PENALTIES IMPOSED IF HE OR SHE DID NOT (OTHER SOURCES CONFIRM THAT THIS IS INDEED SYRIAN LAW). THE NEW LAW MEANS THAT A SYRIAN JEWISH WOMAN WHO HAD SECRETLY MARRIED A FOREIGNER COULD NOW REGISTER HER MARRIAGE WITHOUT PENALTY AND, UPON SUCH REGISTRATION, OBTAIN A PASSPORT TO TRAVEL TO JOIN HER HUSBAND WITHOUT HAVING TO POST BOND. THE SAME

SITUATION WOULD APPLY TO A NON-MARRIED SYRIAN JEWISH WOMAN APPLYING TO MARRY A DESIGNATED FOREIGNER. A SYRIAN JEWISH WOMAN COULD NOT LEAVE THE COUNTRY FOR THE GENERAL PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE TO SOME ONE UNSPECIFIED BUT COULD APPLY FOR A PASSPORT TO VISIT RELATIVES IN EUROPE, FOR EXAMPLE, AND IF A HUSBAND WERE FOUND, THEN EITHER RETURN TO SYRIA, REGISTER WITH THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR AND EXIT THE COUNTRY AGAIN WITHOUT POSTING A BOND, OR ELSE MERELY FORFEIT HER BOND AND REMAIN ABROAD.

C. REGARDING INHERITANCE, SYRIAN JEWS COULD NOW WRITE WILLS BEQUEATHING PROPERTY TO ANY ONE, INCLUDING BOTH PERSONS AND ORGANIZATIONS HAVING LEGAL PERSONALITY, WHEREAS PREVIOUSLY ONLY IMMEDIATE RELATIVES LIVING IN SYRIA COULD INHERIT.

D. SHOEFI SAID THAT ALLOWING SYRIAN JEWS TO OBTAIN
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PROPERTY DOCUMENTATION MEANT THEY COULD NOW FREELY SELL, MORTGAGE, RENT, OR OTHERWISE DISPOSE OF SUCH PROPERTY.

4. SHOEFI SAID THAT NO OTHER EMBASSIES WERE BEING INFORMED OF THIS DECREE AND, OWING TO INTERNAL SENSITIVITIES, IT WOULD NOT BE PUBLISHED IN THE OFFICIAL GAZETTE. HE DID NOT KNOW WHETHER THE JEWISH COMMUNITY HAD AS YET BEEN INFORMED OF IT.

5. COMMENT: THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I HAVE FELT CONFIDENT ENOUGH TO PREDICT WE MAY AT LONG LAST HAVE TURNED THE CORNER TOWARDS AN EFFECTIVE SOLUTION OF THE SYRIAN JEWISH QUESTION. WHILE FULL ANALYSIS OF THE AFFECT OF THIS DECREE WILL HAVE TO AWAIT OBSERVATION OF ITS IMPLEMENTATION, MY INITIAL CONCLUSION IS THAT ASAD HAS GONE AS FAR AS HE CAN AT THIS JUNCTURE TOWARD PERMITTING SYRIAN JEWISH EMIGRATION WITHOUT ACTUALLY SAYING SO. WHILE OUR ATTENTION NATURALLY FOCUSES ON THE EMIGRATION POSSIBILITIES WHICH TGESE MEASURES OFFER, THE ABOLITION OF CUSTODIANSHIP OVER PROPERTY OF DEPARTED SYRIAN JEWS SHOULD ALSO BE SEEN AS AN IMPORTANT GESTURE ESPECIALLY IN LIGHT OF CONTINUED ISRAELI CUSTODIANSHIP OVER PROPERTY OF DEPARTED PALESTINIANS IN ISRAEL.

6. THE UNPUBLICIZED NATURE OF THE NEW DECREE AND THE LOW-KEY MANNER IN WHICH THE USG WAS INFORMED BY A MID-LEVEL OFFICIAL OF THE FOREIGN MINISTRY ARE IN CHARACTER WITH THIS REGIME'S APPROACH TO THE SYRIAN JEWISH ISSUE. ASAD HAS ACTED QUIETLY BUT IN ADVANCE TO TRY TO DEFUSE AN ISSUE WHICH WAS BOUND TO TARNISH SYRIA'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE IN THE PERIOD AHEAD. AT SAME TIME, THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT OBVIOUSLY HOPES AND EXPECTS THAT THIS FURTHER EASING OF

RESTRICTIONS ON ITS JEWISH CITIZENS WILL HAVE A FAVORABLE
IMPACT ON THE U.S. GOVERNMENT AND CONGRESS.

7. I RECOMMEND THAT NO PUBLICITY BE GIVEN TO THESE
MEASURES ON PART OF USG AT THIS TIME. SINCE THE DECREE IS
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NOT BEING PUBLISHED INTERNALLY, IT IS OBVIOUSLY STILL
A SENSITIVE MATTER. ASAD WILL NOT WISH TO BE SEEN AS HAVING
ACTED UNDER PRESSURE. WE SHOULD BE CAREFUL NOT TO DO
ANYTHING WHICH MIGHT JEOPARDIZE OR DELAY PUTTING THESE
MEASURES INTO EFFECT. I DO HOPE AND RECOMMEND THAT THE
FIRST TO BE INFORMED OF THESE NEW DECISIONS BE RABBI
HECHT, SPIRITUAL LEADER OF THE SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY IN
BROOKLYN, WHO HAS CONSISTENTLY COUPLED HIS DEEP CONCERN
FOR THE COMMUNITY WITH HIS UNDERSTANDING AND DISCRETION
ON THIS ISSUE. I ALSO RECOMMEND THAT I BE AUTHORIZED TO
SAY TO KHADDAM AT OUR NEXT MEETING THAT USG WELCOMES THESE
HUMANITARIAN MEASURES AND BELIEVES THEY WILL HAVE A POSITIVE
IMPACT ON SYRIA'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE.
MURPHY

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